

Entrepreneurs: Be Willing to Constantly Learn

"As a business owner, you can choose who you work with, what you work on and how you do it."

How do you start a business, locate funding or deal with challenges as a young entrepreneur? Sheena Lindahl, founder and CEO of [Impact](#), shares inspiring advice with the YALI Network.

How to GET STARTED

What should a business plan contain?

Lindahl: If you need a business plan to get financing or for some other purpose, you may want to use a business plan template. To find one, go to Google and search "business plan template."

State what you want to sell, who you will sell it to, how much it will cost to get started and how you will market your product or service. Don't try to write a perfect plan.

I always think that it's better to start tomorrow. How can I get past that?

Lindahl: Take one action a day to move forward. First, write down your idea. Next, determine your costs. Ask three people how much they would pay if you could deliver your service or product. Make a test piece to see how long it takes to make. Make each step as specific and actionable as possible.

I have a supply company. Should I specialize in selling one specific product or be more general?

Lindahl: The more specialized you are, the better the business does. You become known for that thing, so whenever someone has the need, they know to come to you. And with limited funds, it's hard to invest in many areas.

Does an entrepreneurship education give you more chances of succeeding in business?

Lindahl: The more you educate yourself, the better your chances of success. However, that education does not have to come from a classroom. It is a combination of taking in information and taking action on that information to gain experience. Entrepreneurs have to be willing to constantly learn and apply that learning to their experience.

How to LOCATE FUNDING

Access to financing for young entrepreneurs remains a challenge. How can we work around this?

Lindahl: There are the traditional routes - debt financing through banks, and equity financing through venture capital or angel investors. Explore www.vc4africa.biz.

If these routes do not work, scale down your idea or pivot to something that requires less startup capital. For example, an entrepreneur wanted to build energy-efficient housing, but could not get funding. So he started doing energy audits on existing housing. That business became a success.

Also, look at the assets you do have, like your own knowledge and skills.

I am trying to set up a refrigerated food preservation company. The banks love the idea but say they don't finance startups. How can I find funding?

Lindahl: Remove some of the risk they see. Start the business on a smaller scale. Ask family and friends to invest in a piece of equipment. Use that to show the bank how profitable it would be if you had more equipment. Prove that you know how to get customers and manage money. Ask future customers to invest in the business. Look to www.vc4africa.biz to find angel investors.

How to DEAL WITH CHALLENGES

Is it necessary to continue your studies or stop studies to start looking for money for a business?

Lindahl: Don't quit a job or studies to launch a business unless you are at a point where the business can support you.

I am in a partnership and seem to be the only one interested in getting the business going. How do I deal with the other party?

Lindahl: Talk to your partner. If the person is not interested in running the business, maybe he or she would be willing to walk away and let you do it on your own. If they can't invest the same amount of time or money as you, discuss ways to share ownership of the company.

What are the pros and cons of owning a business?

Lindahl: As a business owner, you can choose who you work with, what you work on and how you do it. But you also have the ultimate responsibility. If things go well, you get the credit. But when challenges arise, it is up to you to solve them or find the answers.

If growth and making a contribution to your community drive you, the extra responsibility of being an entrepreneur will be worth more than the comfort of a corporate job.


These are excerpts from our #YALICHAT with Sheena Lindahl. Find her complete answers on our Facebook page: [on her background](#), on [tips for beginning a business](#), and on the [challenges of women entrepreneurs](#).

You might also be interested in other "[Business and Entrepreneurship](#)" blog posts at yali.state.gov.

Using Social Media to Grow Your Business

Social media offer businesses a variety of tools to inform existing customers, connect with new ones,

raise awareness about products and services and reach new customers and markets.

Monif Clarke uses a social media strategy to promote  sales for her specialty women's clothing company in New York City.

Credit: AP Images

You may have built a website to create an online presence for your business and serve as a platform for sales. It's like a reference book for your business, but a social media presence should be more like a conversation with customers.

Using both forms of online communication strategically can increase your sales and customer base.

Here are a few tips on using social media sites to promote your business:

Be Brief

Social media content must be short. Strive to be concise, and do not try to say everything at once.

Schedule your posts over the course of a day or week, focusing on one key message per post. Customers are more likely to read and remember short, focused messages rather than long, rambling ones.

Be Fresh

Stand out from the continuous stream of social media content by posting timely, eye-catching content. Use images and videos whenever possible, and be sure to post frequently. Staying fresh in the minds of your followers will increase the chances they will choose your products or services.

Be Personal

Social media can give your business a personal voice. Welcome new followers with a casual and friendly tone. Offer exclusive online promotions to these customers.

Be Interactive

Keep your followers engaged by posting articles, links and other content they will find interesting.

Encourage interaction by asking questions and running contests. If you own a restaurant, for instance, ask your followers to name a new menu item. If you sell kitchen equipment, ask people to post their favorite recipes.

Be Responsive

Listen to what customers are saying, so they'll know they're in a conversation. Ask for feedback. Reply to messages and comments. Acknowledge criticism and take steps to address complaints and suggestions.

Be Purposeful

Do your research. Familiarize yourself with the rules of each social media platform and select one that allows you to address customers in a way that's appropriate for you.

Identify the social networks that are most popular with your target customers. Look for a network that gives you access to a population you had not considered before. Invest your time in those that offer the best opportunities for growth.

This article is adapted and condensed from a longer version available on the State Department's [public diplomacy website](#).

During the month of November, the YALI Network will focus on the topic of entrepreneurship, in recognition of the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit](#) to held in Morocco November 19-21.

Is Entrepreneurship for You?

Starting your own business can be an exciting and rewarding experience. It can offer numerous advantages, such as being your own boss, setting your own schedule and making a living doing something you enjoy. But becoming a successful entrepreneur requires thorough planning, creativity and hard work.

Credit: Shutterstock



Consider whether you have the following characteristics and skills commonly associated with successful entrepreneurs:

- 1. Comfortable with taking risks:** Being your own boss also means you're the one making tough decisions. Entrepreneurship involves uncertainty. Do you avoid uncertainty in life at all costs? If yes, then entrepreneurship may not be the best fit for you. If you enjoy the thrill of taking calculated risks, read on.
- 2. Independent:** Entrepreneurs must make a lot of decisions on their own. If you find you can trust your instincts — and you're not afraid of rejection every now and then — you could be on your way to being an entrepreneur.
- 3. Persuasive:** You may have the greatest idea in the world, but if you cannot persuade customers, employees, and potential lenders or partners, you may find entrepreneurship to be challenging. If you enjoy public speaking, engage new people with ease and find you make compelling arguments grounded in facts, it's likely you're poised to make your idea succeed.
- 4. Able to negotiate:** As a small-business owner, you will need to negotiate everything from leases to contract terms to prices. Polished negotiation skills will help you save money and keep your

business running smoothly.

5. Creative: Are you able to think of new ideas? Can you imagine new ways to solve problems? Entrepreneurs must be able to think creatively. If you have insights on how to take advantage of new opportunities, entrepreneurship may be a good fit.

6. Support from others: Before you start a business, it's important to have a strong support system in place. You'll be forced to make many important decisions, especially in the first months of opening your business. If you do not have a support network of people to help you, consider finding a business mentor — someone who is experienced, successful, and willing to provide advice and guidance.

Adapted from an article published on the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) website.

Is This Business Feasible?

Adapted from the Peace Corps manual Doing a Feasibility Study: Training Activities for Starting or Reviewing a Small Business

The first business idea someone has may not be the best one. So to find out if a business can work, do a feasibility study. It will help you answer the question: Are we able to produce a product or service that people want to buy and that we can sell for a profit?

To begin, gather and analyze information that will help you clarify:

- What product or service you want to sell.
- If people will buy the product or service.
- How your business will operate.
- Your estimated sales income.
- Your estimated business expenses.

Find information on the economy of the community in which you want to operate. This information might be in reports from government offices or a university. Or you might talk to people who have a lot of contact with community members, such as extension agents or health workers. Identify products or services that the community may need but does not have now.

Here is what one group did. Its members wanted to start a small grocery store. First, they found out if people would buy food and other items from their store. Then they found out how much it would cost to start the store and keep it operating. Next, they estimated how much they would sell and what their sales income and profits would be.

But in doing their feasibility study, they realized there were already three stores in the community

and concluded that the grocery competition was so strong that their business might fail. They also realized that they needed more startup money than they had or could borrow. So the group rejected the grocery store idea.

Then they thought about other business possibilities. They settled on the idea of a furniture repair service. Since there was little local competition, they decided the business was feasible.

Another group of would-be entrepreneurs raised and marketed pigs. They used a feasibility study to review their operation and found that high feed costs were decreasing their profits. So they decided to look into cheaper kinds of feed, as well as other ways to reduce their business expenses.

Doing a feasibility study will help you assess the viability of your business ideas or review your current business performance.

The Importance of the Cover Letter

After putting together a concise resume, the job seeker needs to sit down and write a cover letter.

“Cover letters make a difference, even short ones,” Susan Adams writes in “How to Write a Cover Letter,” an article published in *Forbes* magazine. “Don’t ever send a boilerplate.”

Adams advises applicants to use the first line of the cover letter to mention a mutual contact. She advises applicants to use a more formal style of writing instead of abbreviations and acronyms, and to proofread the letter carefully.

Adams says experts like cover letters in which the applicant names the job he wants early on and provides a brief summary of his career and accomplishments. The letter should end with a request for a meeting and when the applicant plans to get in touch.

And, importantly, Adams says, cover letters of less than one page — or about four paragraphs — are best.

Photo credit: AP Images
